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BY

MARVIN R. VINCENT, D.D.,

NEW YORK.

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NEW YORK.

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"WHY SHOULD I JOIN THE CHURCH?"

"From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love."—EPH. iv. 16.

THE point of special consideration in this text, is that the efficiency and healthfulness of the whole body is secured by the combination of many parts. Every part works effectually; every joint supplies something; and so the whole body, by means of the harmonious and effectual working of its various members, is a healthy and beautiful unit.

This principle of strength through union has embodied itself in one of the most familiar of our popular proverbs. Yet, familiar as it is, it is astonishing how often it is ignored in some of its moral and religious applications.

And at no point, perhaps, is this more

noticeable than in the views which are entertained by very many persons respecting a union with the Christian Church.

"Why should I join the Church?" is a question very often asked by men and women whom we must believe to be conscientious. Why can not I, supposing I am truly a Christian, be as good, and do as much good outside the Church as in it?

The question indicates a reluctance to take the step of public profession. It may arise from various causes. Perhaps from timidity, from a shrinking from publicity. Perhaps from a very deep sense of the solemnity of the obligations to be assumed, and a consequent fear of dishonoring a public profession. Perhaps from a lurking hesitation to commit one's self; an unconscious wish to keep some way of escape open. Ecclesiastical obligations may present a barrier to conscience. Or one may hesitate on the ground of conscious unworthiness. He does not feel himself good enough to unite with the Church.

I wish to try and answer for some of these, if not for all, the question, Why should I join the Church? Let us then take certain classes of objectors to this act, and, as far as time will allow, attempt to answer them in order.

First comes one with the Bible in his hand. "Show me where I am commanded here to join the Church. Give me chapter and verse." I like challenges of that kind. If a man is sincerely disposed to refer everything to the Bible, and to stand or fall by that, he will not go very far astray.

I reply then, to him: I do not know that there is anywhere in the Bible an express command, "thou shalt join the Church." Yet this may be, and the duty be none the less a scriptural one. Some duties the Bible leaves us to infer; and the obligation in such cases is no less stringent than when it is distinctly prescribed.

There is, in the first place, a plain statement of Christ, that His true followers are to confess Him before men: "Whosoever

therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven," Matt. x. 32.

But it will immediately be said by our objector that this has no necessary bearing on Church membership; that it means only that Christians are to be consistent with their professions, and to set a holy example, and to let their light shine in good works and Christlike dispositions.

And surely this is true. No profession of faith, no confession of Christ, however made, is of the slightest value without the witness of the good profession in the daily life. I insist upon this.

Yet it may fairly be asked if this is all: and in order to answer this, we must try to ascertain how Christ Himself regarded the matter; and thus we have to meet this question: Were the circumstances such as to lead us to suppose that Christ had in His mind, as a part of the confession which He enjoined, a union with a body of believers?

Now, a Christian community was not an

accident of Christ's ministry, nor was it an arbitrary institution. It was a necessity. The moment a man embraced Christ's teaching, he entered upon a region of new ideas and principles, new affinities and desires, which separated him measurably from the society about him, and set him in direct opposition to much of its spirit and practice. Several forces therefore operated to draw Christ's followers into a community. The human social instinct, the longing for human companionship and sympathy, set each man, the moment his faith and practice cut him off from society, or put him at odds with it, looking round for a brother in the same circumstances. Their weakness would naturally combine them for defense. Their common experience would develop mutual sympathy; and then, above all, they had a visible point of union. However they might be affected toward each other, they had a common love and admiration and reverence for Christ, which organized them round Him, made them co-operate to-

ward the same ends, use the same means, and seek the same rewards. When, then, a man confessed Christ in the days of His early ministry, he necessarily identified himself with a community. When Christ said "follow me," he who obeyed must needs follow *in company*. The society of the time knew him not only as a follower of Jesus, but as a member of a party. And so those who charged Peter with his discipleship, not only said, "Thou wert with Jesus of Nazareth," but "Thou also art *one of them*," Matt. xxvi. 73.

If you study the words of our Lord to His disciples, especially in that last most memorable discourse, you will notice how His counsel is framed for a community; how much stress is laid upon their union in Him, and their mutual love and helpfulness. And when He is about to ascend to the Father, His last words provide not only for the preaching of the Gospel to every creature, but for baptism—the universally recognized seal of incorporation with a body of believers.

There can be no manner of doubt of Christ's intent to form a Christian community; and those who came fresh from daily converse with Him, under the special enlightenment and power of the Spirit which He had promised, spoke of the Church as an existing and recognized institution. The multitude converted at Pentecost are declared to have been added to the Church as a matter of course. The apostles always acted upon this assumption. When a man professed faith in Jesus Christ, he was at once baptized and enrolled in the Church. It never seemed to have entered the minds of the apostles that a man could be a Christian and not a church member. They would ordinarily have refused to believe in his sincerity if he had refused to receive baptism after declaring that he believed in the Son of God.

And the apostles, who surely ought to have known the mind of Christ in this matter better than any other men, uniformly represent the Church as Christ's special

care. The Church is "the bride; the Lamb's wife," Rev. ix. 1. He redeemed it with His precious blood. He "gave Himself for it," Eph. v. 25, that He might purify a people to Himself. He walks amid the seven golden candlesticks in the Apocalyptic vision, and says they are the "seven churches," Rev. i. 20.

If, then, Christ instituted a Church, a body of believers; if this institution was to Him a dear and cherished intent; if the organization is the object of His peculiar love and care; if those who received their instructions directly from Him, insisted on union with the Church as the medium of a Christian profession—it seems to me that a true regard for Christ binds *us* no less than those of apostolic days to confess Him through the same medium, and to honor what He so loved as to shed His blood for it. That on which Christ laid such special stress; that which He was at such awful cost to establish; that for which He so mightily prayed,. must have a part, and no

small part, to bear in our Christian profession and life.

But, further than this, Christian ideas have penetrated society to that degree that the outward distinction between a Christian and a man of the world, is not as sharp as it was then. To be a Christian now is to be respectable; whereas then it was to be an outcast. And Christian ideas have toned up morality to such a point that the difference between a Christian and a moralist is not at once patent. And hence it follows that Church membership helps to emphasize this difference. Society may honor a man's uprightness and benevolence; but he identifies himself closely and decisively with Christian sentiment and Christian work by Church membership, as he can not do in any other way. If his integrity and amiability and liberality are impelled and maintained by Christ, he owes it to Christ, and he owes it to the world, to let the fact be known. Society ought not to be left to conclude, as it will conclude, without some formal ac-

knowledgment of his Christian allegiance, that these ripe and fair results are the fruit of natural goodness alone.

But here comes another objector—a well-satisfied man, who says, "What need have I of the Church? I can be as good, and do as much good outside as in it."

I wonder how far you are willing to apply the same rule. Some of you, I dare say, served during our last war, and know something about military matters. Suppose one of you had gone to his commander on the eve of an engagement, and said, "I want to be excused from going into the ranks to-morrow. I see nothing that is to be gained by these movements in regiments and companies. I want to fight; I have a good rifle and plenty of ammunition; I am a good shot, and have experience enough to take care of myself; so I should just like to move round the field and shoot when and where I please." I suppose that you would have been sternly ordered to the ranks, or else sent to the guard-house. What would

become of an army, each man thus manœuvering by himself? The enemy, with his close battalions, would sweep it away like a flood.

Let one come to your office and say, "How foolish of you to maintain a partnership. Each of you is a good, safe business man; why not each conduct business for himself?" You would probably reply, "Neither of us has capital enough to carry on such a business as this; but our joint stock enables us to conduct it with profit." The principle is familiar enough; the principle of the wise man's words, "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward of their labor." The power of the one soldier incorporated with that of ten thousand other men is multiplied twenty fold. Your hundred dollars thrown in with a million is a greater power than if used in some little investment. Your business, founded on the joint capital of yourself and your partner, yields larger returns than the two capitals separately employed. Why now evade the application of the same

principle to the Church? You call yourself a Christian. You say Christ has a right to your services. You have a certain amount of power to invest for Him. The question is where your five or ten talents will turn the largest interest. The Church has accumulated a large capital of experience and piety and influence. She has her methods matured. She knows the fields of effort. She has machinery to carry out her plans. It is fair to presume, is it not, that your stock of knowledge, or piety, or means will work to greater profit under some such organized economy than by itself; that your inexperience will get its best training and direction among those who have for long years been studying and prosecuting the ends of Christian enterprise? This is the mere business basis. There is something more than this.

Those are very exceptional men that develop a sustained enthusiasm through years of lonely work. Most of us need the contact and sympathy of a body of fellow work-

ers to keep our zeal at the proper pitch. Hands will hang down now and then, and feet grow weary and stumble. "Woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up," Eccles. iv. 10. Even in the Church itself you will now and then find one who, through diffidence or natural reserve, keeps his Christian experience mostly to himself—never tells any one about his trials or temptations; and usually you will find that that person thinks no one was ever tried as he is; that his experience is quite peculiar. And if you can once break through that reserve, and draw him into a free conversation with two or three experienced, warm-hearted Christians, you will find the man begin to open his eyes. He is not quite so peculiar as he thinks. He finds that other people have known something of the rough places of Christian life as well as himself; and he goes away from that circle with a new spring of cheer in his heart; with a glimpse of a way out of his straits; with a new courage won from

a brother's intelligent sympathy, and a new antidote for his trouble gathered from a brother's larger experience. If a man is in danger of such a mistake within the circle of Church influences, how much worse is his case who keeps aloof altogether from Church fellowship. He will make sad work of trying to be a lonely Christian. He will get into a great many difficulties which he might easily escape, and be ignorant of a great many things which he might know. It may be said that Christ has promised His sympathy and help to His troubled followers, and that these are better than anything that men can give. That is true, and you will find it true if Christ ever shall call you to go out into the wilderness *alone* with Him; but meanwhile remember that Christ makes His children His agents in imparting many of His choicest blessings; and that therefore in rejecting Christian fellowship it is possible to cut one's self off from Christ's presence and from Christ's gifts.

And then it is in a man's religious development, very much as it is in his development in other things. Let him pursue his own way; isolate himself from society; shut himself up with books; *make himself*, as the phrase goes — and it is rare that such a man's development is not one-sided. He may have power and learning, but society, in its infrequent contact with him, will find him as full of sharp points as a rough mass of quartz. He will be opinionated, narrow, conceited; and society will either drop him altogether, or else handle him without excessive tenderness. In short, after a man has acquired all that his books, and his schools, and his own industry and talent can give him, there is an element necessary to complete him, which nothing but human contact, and a good deal of it, can give him. Solitude never develops ripe and well-rounded men, though it often nurses men of power. And, I repeat, it is just so in Christian development. A man's views of truth, his moral estimates, the general tone of his

religious life, the character of his teaching, all require something which only Christian fellowship can give them. Even our Saviour would not pray that His disciples should be taken out of the world, John xvii. 15. Rather He said: "Go into all the world," Mark xvi. 15. Society is the very atmosphere in which Christian experience unfolds best, and a Christian in habitual solitude is as much out of his element as a fish upon dry land. The worst specimens of religious character are those who refuse the clasp of a brother's hand.

Another objector appears; one to whom our hearts go out in love and admiration for his high conscientiousness. He says: "I am not good enough to enter the Church. The obligations are so solemn, I am afraid to assume them lest I should not keep them." So the obligations are ineffably solemn; obligations to take the Lord for your everlasting portion; to renounce the Devil and all his works; to take up the cross daily and follow Christ. I would not

bate one jot of their solemn import. I rejoice when the appreciation of these is so vivid as to make the candidate ponder well the step he is about to take. And yet on the same ground, you might refuse to put yourself *privately* under bonds of allegiance to Christ. These surely are no less solemn than obligations assumed toward the Church. What can exceed the solemnity of that closet covenant in which you gave yourselves to God? Yet you have ventured to make *that.* You fear you may walk inconsistently before *men*—what of your walk before *God?*

And as regards your ability to maintain your obligations, has Christ called upon you to assume any obligation which it is going to be impossible for you to observe? Ah, if you went forth to this conflict with sin in your own strength; if you were expected to grow into the likeness of your Lord, only by such nourishment as poor humanity, the best of it, affords, you might well hesitate. But even as your trembling lips pronounce the words of allegiance, and your eyes look

fearfully at the coming crosses and temptations, His voice whispers: "Let not your heart be troubled. Believe in me," John xiv. 1. "Lo, I am with you alway," Matt. xxviii. 20; "and this is the victory which overcometh the world, even your faith," 1 John v. 4. You need not discourage this sense of weakness. It is what God wants you to feel. He does not intend to glorify your strength in your Christian conflicts, but to perfect His strength in your weakness.

Withal, it is not at all probable that your Christian life will be a perfect life. It will be strangely unlike every other Christian life if it be not marked by errors and falls. You will be a babe in Christ before you shall have become a strong man; and Christian profession does not commit you to instant perfection of character, any more than birth commits you to instant manhood. Becoming a Christian does not make you perfect. It only puts you on the road to perfection. And while I give this word of comfort to you, I want to give also a word of caution

to those who, so surely as you shall become a member of Christ's Church, will seize upon the first display of your infirmity to rebuke you and excuse themselves from following you. Please to remember, you who censure so sharply, and ask, "Is this a specimen of a church member?"—please to remember that no Christian claims to be anything more than a *pupil* of Christ: under discipline, fighting, not yet victorious. Do not look for the crown and the spotless robe of triumph while the man is still covered with the dust and blood of the fight. After all, the stumbling, weak, erring, yet ever contending Christian has an advantage over you. A quaint old divine of the 17th century, William Gurnall, in his "Christian in Complete Armor," puts the case strongly and well. "True grace when weakest, is stronger than false when strongest. There is a principle of Divine life in it which the other hath not. Now life, as it gives excellency, so it gives strength. The slow motion of a living man, though so slow that he can

not go a furlong a day, yet coming from life, imparts more strength than is in a ship, which, though it sails swiftly, hath its motion from without." Aye! There are some of those stumbling ones; some of those who have fallen more than once, and whose sad stains the Bible is at no pains to conceal, yet whose power in the religious thought and feeling of the present you yourselves confess. Hear a word or two from a man who is called an infidel, and who will not be accused of any undue partiality for Scripture heroes. "David the Hebrew King had fallen into sins enough, blackest crimes—there was no want of sin. And therefore the unbelievers sneer, and ask: Is this your man according to God's heart? The sneer, I must say, seems to me but a shallow one. What are faults—what are the outward details of a life, if the inner secret of it, the remorse, the temptations, the often baffled, never-ended struggle of it be forgotten? David's life and history, as written for us in those Psalms of his, I consider to be the truest

emblem ever given us of a man's moral progress and warfare here below. All earnest souls will ever discern in it the faithful struggle of an earnest human soul toward what is good and best; struggle often baffled, sore baffled, driven as into entire wreck; yet a struggle never ended, ever with tears, repentance, true unconquerable purpose, begun anew."—CARLYLE.

But the other objection: I am not good enough. I must feel satisfied with my attainments in grace before I can unite with the Church. And how long will you remain outside if you wait for this? The more you know of Christ, the less you will be satisfied with self. So long as you shall be honestly striving to copy the example of Jesus, your own heart will never sign your passport into the Church. Do not cherish this mistake any longer. As you have looked, with hungry eyes, in days past, upon the band of Christians at their sacred feast, and have longed to be sitting there with them, have you thought that they were eating and

drinking in the consciousness of goodness or worthiness? No, no. Not one sincere heart was there which, while it glowed with gratitude and praise, did not also weep over past errors, and conscious weakness and unfaithfulness, and mingle the prayer for pardon with the hymn of thanksgiving. And you will know all about this when you shall come (as God grant you may soon come) to the Eucharistic feast yourselves. The principle on which the Church is founded is that of our text. The union of many parts, each small and weak in itself; and when a man comes to the Church's doors and knocks for admission, he does not say, "I have attained the standard of holiness required for Church fellowship. I am strong enough and good enough now to come in and live and work with you." No. He says: "I am too weak to stand alone. I am too inexperienced to escape Satan's snares. I must have sympathy or my heart will break. I am ignorant and erring. Brethren, open your doors to me. Give me

shelter. Lend me your helping hands. Bear with my errors. Let me walk toward heaven with you. Take in return what little power I have. Use it for Christ, and teach me to use it." The Church is for such as these: instituted not for the strong, but for the weak, not for the wise, but for the foolish.

Sometimes I have heard it said: I am not fit to join the Church, because I can not name the day and hour of my conversion. Suppose a traveler should have stood by the bank of the Nile twenty years ago, and watched the waters come up over the land and go down again, leaving the rich soil full of seeds, and have seen the fields grow green with the coming harvest, and then have turned away saying, "The Nile flood does no good. I know nothing about its source;" would the harvest be any less abundant because the great river hid its head? The question is not when nor how you were converted; but, *do you now believe in Jesus your Redeemer?* If the power

of Christ is at work in your soul now, if the seeds of grace are bearing fruit in your life, if its current sets toward God, what matters it if the beginnings of all this be hidden?

There is another objection raised about doctrinal peculiarities. Many say: "I can not find a Church whose creed covers all the points of my belief, or allows me at the same time to hold my own convictions on certain points." A very wide subject is opened here. Yet one or two things may be said to purpose. The difficulty is too often one of man's making and not of Christ's. I am free to say that no Church which is conducted upon a true Christian basis will present any real difficulty to one who sincerely holds the great essentials of the Christian faith. The Church is a school. She has a right to require of her *teachers* assent to such theological views as the particular branch to which they seek admission may hold. But she receives members as *pupils*, and has no right to require of them,

as a condition of admission, an assent to anything beyond the fundamental doctrines of Christianity. By its constitution, the particular branch of the Church is bound to teach those whom it receives according to its own scheme of Christian doctrine. It can not do less in common consistency. But to require assent, as a condition of church membership, to a theological scheme to which, in scores of cases, a candidate can give neither a conscientious nor an intelligent assent, is to go in the face of Christ, and of the fundamental principles of His Church. What the Church has a right to require of those who seek her communion is, satisfactory evidence that they love our Lord Jesus Christ and trust in His merits alone for salvation; that they shall be willing to submit to the government and discipline of the Church so long as they shall remain in it, and be baptized, as Christ commanded (no matter in what way), as the outward sign of their union with the body of believers. With such credentials as these,

no Church has a right to turn an applicant from her doors. And I may be allowed to say, that when the Presbyterian Church is true to her own declared principles, there is no Church on the face of the earth which opens a wider door to the true followers of Christ than she does.

And on one other point I must briefly touch. It is an important and a delicate one. An objection comes sometimes in this form: "I am waiting for my wife. I am waiting for my husband; for my brother, or for my sister." And I know that, in many cases, this consideration is sincerely urged, and is not a mere excuse for neglect of duty. Nevertheless, I can not help feeling that this is a matter between each soul and Christ. I can conceive cases in which it would be quite right to delay uniting with the Church. If you resided in a place where there was but a single church organization, and if union with that required of you assent to what your conscience could not approve, you would do wrong to unite with it. But

when the question is merely that of accommodating yourself to the delay of the most intimate friend, the nearest kinsman, then I doubt if you are excused. I repeat—this matter is between your own soul and God; between you and your Master, Christ. Nothing has a right to stand between you and the open door of that fold into which He calls all His own sheep. No one has the right to stand between you and the duty of confessing your Saviour before men.

With these considerations before you I trust that some of you who have been long undecided on this important step in Christian life, will take it soon. Come to Christ's altars, feeling that you come by His express command; that the Church is His own institution, and His appointed medium of the Christian profession of His followers.

Come, because your power can be turned to best account under the great, matured systems of the Christian Church, and in concert with the vast power already enlisted there.

Come, because you need the Church's

shelter, sympathy, and help, so that when you fall there may be the right hand of a fellow to lift you up.

Come, notwithstanding your doubts and fears. Your obligations are solemn. It is well that you feel their solemnity. May God deepen the impression. But remember that you assume not one of them in your own strength; that when you speak of strength, lo, He is strong! Remember that you will come into no community of perfect men and women, but into a society of weak and fallible ones who, because each is weak, have united to help each other.

Members of the Church, this approaching communion reminds us anew of the principle of our church organization. We are the Master's representatives in strengthening weak hands, confirming feeble knees, and saying unto fearful hearts, "Be strong." Our testimony of love to Christ is through His brethren. Oh, ought we not to strive to show those who seek our fellowship that the communion of saints is, to us, something

more than a formula? Ought we not to be at more pains to emphasize our fellowship to those who are without, to stand at our open doors with words of invitation, and with outstretched hands? Ought we not to be most cautious as to our walk and conversation, so as not to repel by inconsistency those who may be looking toward us with interest and even with longing?

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